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RESPONSES OF ROMAN CATHOLIC PARISHES TO THE MARKET SITUATION

Summary: Now that religious participation largely depends on individual choice, parishes find themselves confronted with the challenge of organizational renewal. How to cope with this new 'market-situation'? Scholarly literature suggests two strategies. The first strategy is that of the service institution, the second that of the exclusive firm. A survey carried out in the Netherlands shows that parishes do not differentiate along these lines. The data do indicate, however, different ways of coping with the strategic challenge parishes are faced with: holding on to a Christian profile while trying to stay in contact with the public. Thus, three parish types could be discerned: the open parish, the inviting parish, and the 'parochial' parish.

Since Vatican II, it has become common usage to refer to the parish as a community. In fact, the Catholic parish cannot be regarded sociologically as a community, i.e., an enduring human figuration characterized by shared beliefs and values, frequent interaction, and the provision of reciprocal social support and mutual aid. The variations in beliefs and values among parishioners are considerable, parishes are simply too large for frequent interaction other than among a small minority, and little support is provided to members in need¹.

For almost half a century, it has increasingly been a matter of choice whether and to what extent individuals participate. Our suggestion is that, in this respect, it is more adequate and useful to consider the parish as an organization. This perspective makes it possible to address the issue of how parishes, as organizations, are dealing with a social environment in which people who do not regard their participation as self-evident. What kind of organizational structure are these parishes developing? Because we do not know how existing parishes see themselves in this respect, the main question addressed in the present study is: what is the perception parishes have of themselves as an organization?

In this regard the case of the Netherlands is interesting. The Dutch religious situation is characterized by two developments: declining power of the established religious regimes and modest persistence of individual religious (not necessarily Christian) beliefs, experiences, and practices². The

¹ M.P. HORNSBY-SMITH, *The Changing Parish*, Routledge, London & New York, 1989, pp. 66-94.

² J.W. BECKER - J. DE HART - J. MENS, *Secularisatie en alternatieve zingeving in Nederland*, SCP, Rijswijk, 1997; J.W. BECKER - J.S.J. DE WIT, *Secularisatie in de jaren*

European Values Studies indicate that the Dutch religious profile can be positioned between that of the Scandinavian countries, on the one hand, and former East Germany and the Czech Republic, on the other³. Church adherence is low; Christian beliefs are not very popular; relatively few people consider themselves as religious; and non-Christian items such as reincarnation are not as popular in the Netherlands as they are in the USA, Great Britain, or France. Most people do not consider themselves members of a church, but neither do they consider themselves as completely irreligious. This context seems to be providing an impetus for renewal of church organization.

We have observed a similar disagreement, within both scholarly literature and circles of church policy, concerning the strategy to be used to realize a vital church in a context of pluralism and individualism. This context is also called a market situation. On the one hand, one may discern the strategy of the plural church or service-institute⁴, on the other, the strategy of the strict church or exclusive firm⁵.

The first approach argues that since modern individuals behave as consumers, churches should explore the (often implicit) religiosity of the people⁶ and offer the richness of the Christian tradition, its rituals and wisdom in a way that is accessible to these shopping individuals. This view may result in a plea for a commodification of the Christian tradition⁷. According to these authors, the church can benefit from transforming itself into a religious service institute. Moreover, they can argue that, for quite a number of people, it is probably already operating as such.

The second approach argues that in a context of pluralism, an exclusivist strategy is the road to success. Propositions of the 'new paradigm' are that a religious organization has to have a discernable identity; that there should be a reward on membership; and that it should cost individuals

negentig. Kerklidmaatschap, verandering in opvattingen en een prognose, SCP, Rijswijk, 2000.

³ HERMANN DENZ "Religiosität und Kirchlichkeit im Wandel: Versuch einer Typologie", in: I. BAUMGARTNER, - CHR. FRIESL - A. MÁTÉ-TÓTH (eds.), *Den Himmel offen halten*, Tyrolia-Verlag, Innsbruck-Wien, 2000, pp. 15-21.

⁴ HERMAN STEINKAMP, "Gemeinden jenseits der Pfarrei", in: HANS-GEORG ZIEBERTZ (ed.), *Christliche Gemeinde vor einem neuen Jahrtausend*, Deutscher Studien Verlag, Weinheim, 1997, pp. 233-246; J. de HART "Kerkelijke en niet-kerkelijke religie" in: *Praktische theologie* 26(3) 1999, 277-296; STAF HELLEMANS, "Veranderende religie, veranderende kerken", in: *Praktische theologie* 26(3) 1999, 315-326.

⁵ RODNEY STARK - ROGER FINKE, *Acts of Faith: Explaining the Human Side of Religion*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 2000.

⁶ STAF HELLEMANS - WILLEM PUTMAN - JOZEF WISSINK, *Een kerk met toekomst? De katholieke kerk in Nederland 1960-2020*, Meinema, Zoetermeer, 2003.

⁷ PETE WARD, *Liquid Church*, Hendrickson - Paternoster, Peabody, MA - Cumbria, 2002.

something to participate, provided they perceive benefits that exceed the efforts they made. Authors advocating rational choice theory claim that church-to-sect movements are taking place, for instance, in the Roman Catholic Church, and that this is a better strategy for achieving vitality than a trend towards liberalism⁸.

Both approaches make a similar distinction between service institution and exclusive firm. They only differ in terms appreciation of the two options. 'Liberal' authors prefer that the church continues to be relevant for those who do not want to invest much in their commitment to the church; their opponents indicate that only strict churches are strong.

The issue that concerns us here is not the question 'who is right?', but a more modest, descriptive, question: do existing parishes define themselves along these lines? And if so: which types prevail and in what measure? If not: is it possible to discern other patterns? Our aim, therefore, is to find out how parishes cope with the problems (or challenges) they are faced with. Additionally, we will reflect upon the perspectives these strategies have.

1. An organizational perspective on the parish

Firstly, however, we have to clarify our organizational perspective. Can a parish be rightly considered an organization? In this article, we follow a sociological tradition, founded by Max Weber, claiming that an organizational perspective on the church is useful⁹.

The Roman Catholic Church is a social unit that was established for an explicit purpose: to spread the Word and to provide the sacraments intermediated by the ministry. The world's oldest multinational may be considered a *concern*. This concern consists of dioceses, led by bishops who have the authority to manage affairs in their own domain, within canonical boundaries. Usually, a diocese consists of parishes. In the Netherlands, parishes are under the collegiate administration of a parish priest and a parish council. The parish priest may cooperate with one or more professional

⁸ ERIK SENGERS, "Al zijn wij katholiek, wij zijn Nederlanders": Opkomst en verval van de katholieke kerk in Nederland sinds 1795, Eburon, Delft, 2003; ERIK SENGERS "'You don't have to be a saint or a practicing catholic...'", in *Antonianum* 78 2003, 529-545.

⁹ MARY A. THUNG, *The Precarious Organization*, Mouton, Den Haag, 1976; JOSEPH F. MCCANN, *Church and Organization: A sociological and theological enquiry*, University of Scranton Press, Scranton - London - Toronto, 1993; STEPHEN PATTISON, "Management and pastoral theology", in: J. WOODWARD - S. PATTISON (eds.), *The Blackwell Reader in Pastoral and Practical Theology*, Blackwell, Oxford, 2000, 283-296; N.J. DEMERATH III et al., *Sacred Companies: Organizational Aspects of Religion and Religious Aspects of Organizations*, Oxford University Press, New York - Oxford, 1998.

lay ministers ('pastoral workers'). Usually, they will see pastoral policy as their common concern; incidentally, this collective responsibility is officially confirmed.

The parish council consists of parishioners appointed by the bishop and is chaired (since 1983) by the parish priest. This council is responsible for the management of the parish and advises on pastoral matters as well. A distinctive body may exist to perform the latter task: the parish assembly or the pastoral group. Very often these lay bodies have an important say in the policy of the parish, if only because, nowadays, one man is usually the parish priest for several parishes. A great deal of pastoral work is carried out and coordinated by volunteers, comparable with the way reformed churches are run.

Therefore, although the parish may *also* be formally considered the work area of a bishop's division manager, it makes sense to consider the parish as a relatively autonomous organization within a larger 'concern'. This local organization is at least partially led by laypersons.

In order to distinguish patterns in the various ways parishes respond to the situation they are facing, we formulated a series of statements. As a guide to formulating statements for the two distinctive types (exclusive firm and service institute), we made use of the classical typology Peter Blau and Richard Scott¹⁰. As in relation to any formal organization, four basic categories of persons can be distinguished: 1) those who consider themselves, and are generally considered, members, i.e. parishioners; 2) the managers of the organization: parish priest and council; 3) the public-in-contact: visitors, e.g., those who attend services at Christmas, but do not consider themselves church members; and 4) the public-at-large: the members of the (local) society in which the parish operates.

Applying the *cui bono* (which is the prime beneficiary?) criterion, Blau and Scott distinguish four types of organization: mutual-benefit association, business concerns, service organizations, and commonweal organizations. In the Dutch, plural, context, the parish is probably a mixed type – part mutual benefit, part service – since the parish organization has a mission for all baptized, whether or not they are practicing Catholics. However, since we are searching for differentiation, we make a distinction between the two types. This enables us to discern different accents in the way parishes approach their environment.

To the extent that a parish operates as a *mutual benefit association*, the members, that is, the volunteers and the regular participants, dominate the

¹⁰ PETER M. BLAU - W. RICHARD SCOTT, *Formal Organizations: A Comparative Approach*, Routledge - Kegan Paul, London, 1963, pp. 42-45.

organization.¹¹ The main issue then is to serve the interests of the members. Mutual support is encouraged; consuming behavior is discouraged. It is the organization's intention that those who are interested (the served public) become participating members.

To the extent that a parish operates as a *service organization*, the public-in-contact, more specifically, the interest of the served public, dominates the organization. Consuming behaviour is expected. The parish conceives of itself as offering religious services, comparable to a mental health institute offering psychological services.

We have tried to restrict our statements to variations on these formal criteria, and to stay clear from theological issues (orthodoxy versus liberalism). Applying this typology to the parish, there is, however, the risk of interference from another (Weberian) distinction, namely, between the orientation towards the religious virtuosos on the one hand, and those who are moderately or incidentally interested (cf. *Massenreligiosität, distanzierte Kirchlichkeit*), on the other. This is another analytical distinction: mutual benefit associations may recruit members from the circle of those who have a strong interest, but they may also recruit members from the circle of those who have a moderate interest. Likewise, service organizations may provide services to those who are strongly interested in religious matters or those who are moderately interested.

We used this dimension as an additional basis for our typology. This resulted in a matrix with four boxes. Thus, four categories can be distinguished: (1) the mutual benefit association for the moderately interested; (2) the mutual benefit association for the strongly interested (3) the service organization for the strongly interested; and (4) the service organization for the moderately interested¹².

2. Research and results

Using this artificial theoretical construct (*Idealtipe*), we formulated 74 statements regarding the positioning of the parish. We addressed 19 themes.

To explore the first dimension (mutual benefit vs. service), we formulated statements about the importance of boundaries, the parish newsletter,

¹¹ This in accordance with proposition 42: "Among religious organizations, there is a reciprocal relationship between the degree of lay commitment and the degree of exclusivity." (R. STARK – R. FINKE, *Acts of Faith*, 2000, p. 142) Indeed, BLAU and SCOTT already mentioned 'religious sects' as an example of mutual benefit associations (*Formal Organizations*, p. 45).

¹² KEES DE GROOT, "Religieuze organisaties in meervoud: Mogelijkheden voor 'de kerk' in de huidige Nederlandse samenleving", in: *Praktische theologie* 28(1), 2001, 5-24.

funeral services attended by non-participants, and volunteers in the parish. To explore the second dimension (orientation toward strongly religious interested, vs. moderately interested), we formulated both statements about the criteria for the activities the parish organizes and about the presupposed religious interest.

To explore the reality value of the four ideal types, we formulated statements about the perception of 'community', involvement, solemnization of a marriage, type of belief, accessibility of the liturgy, diaconate, catechesis, community of faith, image of the pastor, mission, community building, target group. We also included four biblical mottos we thought were typical of each of the four ideal types. All statements were presented with a four-point scale (applies strongly, applies, applies to some extent, does not apply (or hardly)).

In spring 2003, the questionnaire was mailed to a representative sample of 215 parishes, originating from all seven Dutch dioceses. In the accompanying letter we requested that a few members of the parish council or assembly fill in this questionnaire about the positioning of the parish together. This request was explicitly addressed to them since we expected them to have insight into the way the parish operates. After one follow-up letter, 103 parishes responded (47.9%), which is satisfactory for a postal survey.

First, we carried out a confirmatory factor analysis. This showed that the analytical dimensions could not be discerned in the empirical data. Parishes with high scores on 'mutual benefit' items have high scores on 'service'-items as well. Neither do they choose between those who have a strong interest in religion those who have a moderate interest. Therefore, it appears that the four ideal types are not real types. But in what way do parishes differentiate? Is there a useful classification possible, using our analytical framework?

Although the variation among the parishes is low, we managed to successfully carry out an exploratory factor analysis (with Varimax-rotation), resulting in two components with sufficiently high factor loadings (> 0.45), double factor loadings excluded. The components are highly reliable; both the first, including 21 statements, which we termed 'perceived accessibility' ($\alpha=0.90$) and the second, including 13 statements, we termed 'Christian profile' ($\alpha=0.83$). These two components explain 36.2 % of the total variance.

The first factor measures the extent to which the respondents recognized their parish in the following profile: an accessible community for religious affairs. One can come and go as one likes, according to one's personal need. This community has a Christian identity and is open to everyone. Keyword: *accessibility*. The items this factor is composed of characterize

what the parish has to offer, the style in which it operates, and the kind of people they want to serve.

Dimension: Perceived accessibility

Offering:

- Something to hold on to, comfort, a momentary sense of solidarity
- Spirituality
- Religiosity
- Support
- Initiation
- A home

Style:

- Presenting
- Meet the need
- Comfortable
- Accompany
- Embedding

For whom?

- All kinds of people
- Seekers
- Consumers
- Incidental visitors

What is their motivation?

- There's something beyond
- Questions about life and its meaning
- Vague notion of belief
- Search for spirituality

The second factor measures the extent to which a parish is recognized in the following profile: a community that strongly stresses its distinctive Christian features. It is expected that parishioners have a real religious interest and are prepared to participate. The parish expresses strong ideas about its mission. Commitment to the Christian tradition is central. Keyword: *Christian profile*. (Remarkable detail: all biblical mottos are included here.) The composing items address the mission of the parish and the underlying expectations of the people who are interested.

*Dimension: Christian profile***Mission:**

- Agreement with biblical mottos
- Jesus Christ fundamental
- Deep religious faith
- Community building

Expectations:

- Active participation (services, bible study, prayer groups)
- Interest in and acquaintance with Christian tradition
- Determination to be a Christian
- A wish for the 'hard stuff', not for pious nonsense

'When you listen well, you'll find that people have a longing for God'

Although these factors differ from the original analytical constructs, it is tempting to recognize the traits of the 'service institute' and the 'exclusive firm', respectively. However, there is a snag in it somewhere.

75% of the parishes share the first profile. They recognize themselves in the image of a Christian community that is accessible to anyone with religious needs. A smaller category (30%) identifies with a stronger Christian profile. These parishes demand active participation and strong motivation.

Our next step was to investigate the correlation between these two scales. If they represented the 'service institute' and the 'exclusive firm', there would, of course, be a negative correlation. A high score on 'Christian profile' would correspond with a low score on 'perceived accessibility'. We took the two scores 'Does not apply (or hardly)' and 'Applies to some extent' together as a low score; 'Applies' and 'Applies strongly' were taken together as a high score.

Table: Correlation between 'Perceived accessibility' and 'Christian profile', percentages (N = 90)

	Christian profile:		Total (N)
	low	high	
Perceived accessibility:			
Low	23	2	25 (23)
High	47	28	75 (67)
Total (N)	70 (63)	30 (27)	100 (90)

The distribution of the cases is not as expected. What is interesting is the almost empty upper right-hand cell. Hardly any parish (only two) consistently favored the items related to the 'exclusive firm' and rejected the items related to the 'service institution'. Surprisingly, considering the apparent theoretical contradictions, the factor 'Christian profile' is usually combined with the factor 'accessibility'. This result provides an interesting comment on the debate between the proponents of the exclusive firm and the proponents of the service institution. In the last section, we will explore what this teaches us about the various ways in which parishes react as organizations.

For now, comparing the (analytical) typology with our (empirical) classification, we may conclude:

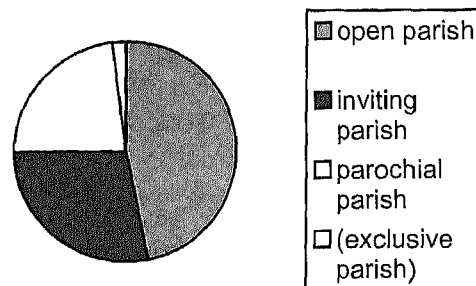
- a. Nearly half of all parishes (the largest category) perceive themselves as service institutions, while lacking a strong identity.
- b. There is a category of parishes combining a service orientation and a strong identity
- c. There is a category rejecting both options
- d. There is no category that identifies completely with the concept of the exclusive firm.

3. Conclusion and discussion

Our question was: do members of some Dutch parish councils identify their parish as an exclusive firm, while members of other parish councils identify their parish as a service institution? Or is there another pattern? The

first answer must be negative. Most parishes see themselves as 'open communities'. Parishes do not define themselves as exclusive firms. Yet, the analytical distinction reveals a slightly different pattern. The following chart represents the figures of the table above.

Parish types



We will make some explanatory remarks on the three major types. (The fourth type hardly corresponds to an empirical reality.)

The *open parish* is accessible, or supposedly so, and does not have a strong Christian profile. This type fits in well with modern consumerism. Everyone looking for rituals, spirituality, or simply a sense of belonging is welcome. It is the object of the parish to tune in with the common vague notion that there is 'something out there'. That does not simply mean that they are 'ashamed of the gospel'. Prayer, the bible, the sacraments, and the Christian tradition are held as important. However, sensitivity to what is offensive in individualized, pluralized, and secularised Dutch society is high. The door is open. All persons are allowed to decide for themselves to what extent they will participate or identify with the Roman Catholic Church.

The *inviting parish* combines high accessibility with a strong Christian profile. Everyone who is searching for 'something more' is welcome, highly motivated or not, but the parish organization itself is characterized by a clearly identifiable Christian identity. The Catholic notion of a 'natural longing for God' is clearly present. The parish is there to cultivate this longing and shape it into a truly Christian faith. This is, in the end, where it's at. It is not a problem that people behave as consumers; they are invited to become confessing and practising Christians.

The *parochial parish* combines low accessibility with a weak Christian profile. You cannot easily start to participate in this parish. Neither is it clear what to expect or to gather what is expected from you. In a way this is typical for a *community* as it was coined by Ferdinand Tönnies. A commu

nity is simply there (*zuhanden*)¹³. It was there before and meant to stay. One does not 'choose' to participate; one is born into a parish. As soon as one starts to think about the identity of a community, it stops being a community. Being part of a community speaks for itself.

This parish does not 'offer' services or try to attract 'members'. This parish does not have an 'identity profile' or a mission statement. This parish just *is*. Sympathetic as this Heideggerian attitude may be, this is probably the type of parish that has given the adjective 'parochial' its meaning. *Collins Cobuilt English Language Dictionary* (1987) says: 'People who are *parochial* think only about their own local affairs and interests.'

Lifting the interpretation of the data to a higher level of abstraction, one may conclude that parishes are facing severe challenges. They are coming from a situation in which, for a period of nearly 100 years, participation was self-evident. Being part of Catholic subculture meant participating in the local parish. Within this subculture, the Catholic Church held a religious monopoly. Nowadays, parishes are challenged, on the one hand, to address the (implicit) religious needs of the general public (including secularised Catholics) at the risk of losing their specifically Christian identity. On the other, parishes are called on to stress their distinctive features, at the risk of losing contact with all those who are baptized in this church and who do not identify completely with the Roman Catholic Church or feel the need to participate frequently. The former strategy may end in a church that vanishes; the latter in a church that is reduced to a sect.

Our starting-point was the disagreement about the strategy of religious organizations in a context of pluralism. We found out that Dutch Catholic parishes do not favour the strategy of the radical exclusive firm. Furthermore, the polarity between an inclusive and an exclusive strategy doesn't seem to be very helpful in understanding the challenges these parishes are facing. Catholic parishes are not inclined to make a choice in this respect. What parishes are experiencing is the strategic challenge of holding on to a Christian profile while trying to stay in contact with the public. We found three typical ways of dealing with this challenge. What are the perspectives for these three types? We will conclude our contribution with some speculative remarks.

In the Netherlands, as in other European countries (*offene Kirche, open church*), the concept of hospitality, represented by the metaphor of the inn, is very popular in both Protestant congregations and Catholic parishes¹⁴. Its realisation, however, is not so easy. 'Hospitality has no hidden agenda', it is

¹³ ZYGMUNT BAUMAN, *Community: Seeking safety in an insecure world*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 2001, pp. 7-20.

¹⁴ JAN HENDRIKS, *Gemeente als herberg*, Kok, Kampen, 1999; www.opwegnaardeherberg.nl.

said. But also: 'A good host would not hesitate to offer the best he has.' In practice, the former attitude would imply that there is no intention to convert people to a particular belief; the latter would. We expect that two different types of parishes will welcome the concept of hospitality.

The first is the *inviting parish*. This type tries to remain open without forsaking its identity. It has a strong theological motivation to be accessible. This is the position defended by authors who believe there is a future for a church caring for its spiritual traditions and offering elements of these traditions to the faithful and to non-believers, those of other faiths, ex-believers, and believers-to-be.¹⁵ Theological and management skills are required to put this into practice. If these are present, this strategy may work out successfully. In our view, this is the most interesting and the most promising type.

The second type is the *open parish*, dealing with the challenges by giving priority to the accessibility of the parish. These parishes may attract people with vivacious celebrations, an active social network, and a keen sense of contemporary religious consciousness. In villages and parts of towns where the Catholic parish is (still) strongly connected to the local community, this may be a successful way of operating. The strength of these parishes lies in the commitment of the volunteering parishioners. Their main concern is recruiting volunteers from the new generation for new activities.

The *parochial parish* has the worst perspectives. No reconstruction of the organisation here: the parish continues to rely on the loyal participation of the faithful. As long as there is a local Catholic subculture, and competition from sport clubs and cultural activities is weak, these parishes may survive. In fact, however, these are probably not very vital parishes. The continuation of these parishes is insecure. In this case, models of cooperation and mergers only conceal that there is no future in their marginal position.

Our conjecture would be that – in so far as organizational efforts matter – religious participation of Dutch Catholics is not going down because parishes favour consuming behaviour, but because, in fact, a number of parishes refrain from reacting to the challenges they are faced with. It is not so strange that, in these cases, organizational renewal fails to occur. After all, the future is uncertain.

¹⁵ S. HELLEMANS – W. PUTMAN – J. WISSINK, *Een kerk met toekomst?*, p. 134.

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